



POLICY PAPER

The crisis of local journalism in V4 countries and the specific role of municipal newspapers

Research findings from the Czech Republic

The project was supported by:



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Introduction

Local level – current situation

Minimal systemic and legislative grasp is specific to the regional level of journalism, especially for print and online media. At the same time, the situation of the regions is rarely part of public debates in the Czech Republic, and this also applies to the discussion of media problems. Historical changes in media ownership, new formats, and a long-term underestimation of and disinterest in the topic of regional media have resulted in the current state of affairs – a lack of quality media, a lack of transparency, a lack of statistical data that would allow for a better understanding of the situation, and the rise of media that are financially and content-dependent on regional governing structures.

According to the 2021 assessment of The Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom, the indicator "Access to media for local/regional communities and community media" has a high long-term risk level (75%). The reasons, according to Štětka, lie in the absence of a legislative framework for community media and in the weak support of local media by the state.¹

There are many regions in the Czech Republic that are specific, have their own needs and problems and for their solution information from the national level is not sufficient. This is where the oft-mentioned link between independent, quality journalism and democracy lies – local issues need to be addressed through debate, but this must be based on factual information.

Regional editorial offices are disappearing, and the original local print newspapers are closing down, mostly because no younger successor can be found to ensure continuation. The vacant space was filled by formats that are usually far from quality information. Probably the strongest are the media that belong directly to local governments – municipal newspapers, television and radio. However, these media are often unable to meet the basic qualities of information, as the content is directly approved/controlled by elected representatives of cities and regions. Oživení has long pointed to the unbalanced presentation of different opinions in these media.

Terminological notes

One of the big challenges of the whole project was to unify the terms so that the situation in each country would be comparable and understandable for the reader. The basic problem is that the classification of different types of media is not clear even at national levels. The primary focus of the study is on regional news coverage and the formats and types of media that deliver news or appear to do so to readers/viewers.

The main terms used in the study

Local and regional media: the term local refers mainly to the geographical coverage within one municipality, while regional media cover a larger territorial unit – district, region, county.

Municipal newspapers and other local government media: they are defined by their connection to local government, although they are not always published directly by local government. In the case of TV and a minority of municipal newspapers or other formats, it is a matter of contracting the publication to private entities.

Advertising media: defined by very insufficient journalistic work and by an extensive business department for securing advertising on which their economic model is based.

Printed media, online media, news websites/portals, television, radio: The study primarily focuses on print media, for which the most data exist in all countries.

¹ <https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/74708/MPM2022-TheCzechRepublic-CS.pdf?sequence=3&isAllowed=y>

1. Mapping of relevant actors and their relationship in the regional media environment

The regional level is facing major fragmentation. As a consequence, it is difficult to obtain data that would provide a comprehensive overview. The regional press and other regional media are not tracked in the statistics², so basic data is missing. Media formats published by municipalities, towns and regions have been massively expanded. At the same time, however, there are many private entities operating at the regional level from which local governments often buy media content or pay them to publish municipal newspapers. As we show below, these companies receive significant sums from public budgets. This is especially true for regional TV revenues, but also for media groups that specialize in free municipal and in-house print titles delivered to mailboxes. Although independent print news is declining, several news portals have emerged that can be seen as evidence that reviving regional news coverage may not be a pipe dream. These include, for example, the Boskovice-based *Ohlasy*³ or the Drbna.cz regional online news network, which is gradually being centralized though, as is the case with other regional media networks.⁴

Independent local/regional print media

The database of printed periodicals is managed by the Ministry of Culture, but the database does not provide an overview of regional printed news because this type is not included in the content classification.⁵

An overview of the local print media that are dedicated to news is provided mainly by the research of Lenka Waschková Císařová. According to the database on the lokalnik.cz website, in 2009 there were a total of 60 regional/local independent media in the Czech Republic that were dedicated to reporting on local events. In 2019, there were 29 remaining, and they keep disappearing.

For her research, Waschková Císařová defines regional press as a periodical published on the territory of a municipality, city, district, region or county that meets selected internal characteristics of a news media: a minimum frequency of 24 copies per year; only paid newspapers (not free newspapers); only privately owned newspapers (not newspapers published by local governments); and with a general news content focus (i.e. not advertising or PR periodicals).⁶

According to data from the Ministry of Culture, the majority of newspaper publishers are based in the capital city of Prague, while the Ministry does not register any newspaper publishers in the following five regions – Plzeň, Karlovy Vary, Ústí nad Labem, Zlín and Moravia-Silesia.⁷

² [Office of Print Cost Verification of the Czech Republic](#) records data only for the Vltava Labe media publishing house *Daily* newspapers and for the regional monthly newspapers the data is for the Prague 8 municipal newspaper. The Publishers' Union and its surveys provide no other data. According to the latest data, less than 400,000 people read the *Daily* newspaper edition – http://www.unievydavatelu.cz/gallery/files/2022_11_10%20-%20UV%20-%20Z%20A1kladn%C3%ADv%C3%BDsledky%20MEDIA%20PROJEKTU%20za%204_%20Q%202021%20a%205%BE%203_%20Q_%202022.pdf

³ <https://ohlasy.info/>

⁴ <https://www.drbna.cz/o-projektu.html>

⁵ <https://www.mkcr.cz/tridnik-obsahoveho-zamereni-cs-482>

⁶ http://www.clovekamedia.cz/konference/sborniky/cm_2012_podzim.pdf

⁷ <https://www.statistikakultury.cz/zakladni-statisticke-udaje/>, https://www.statistikakultury.cz/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/ZSU3_2021_Knihovny_a_vydavatelaska_cinnost.pdf

TABULKA 2.2 VYDAVATELÉ NOVIN

Kraj	Vydavatelé ¹¹	Tituly ¹²	Náklad	Remitenda
Česká republika	19	153	151 835 743	22 094 944
Hlavní město Praha	5	8	145 232 813	22 069 206
Středočeský kraj	2	-	-	-
Jihočeský kraj	2	-	-	-
Plzeňský kraj	-	-	-	-
Karlovarský kraj	-	-	-	-
Ústecký kraj	-	-	-	-
Liberecký kraj	1	1	16 200	1 105
Královéhradecký kraj	3	3	542 570	24 633
Pardubický kraj	1	-	-	-
Vysočina	1	-	-	-
Jihomoravský kraj	3	1	451 440	-
Olomoucký kraj	1	1	14 500	-
Zlínský kraj	-	-	-	-
Moravskoslezský kraj	-	-	-	-

¹¹ Započítávají se pouze vydavatelé s převažující činností ve vydávání novin.
¹² Započítávají se pouze vydané novinyové tituly a jejich náklad.

The Ministry also monitors statistics on periodical and non-periodical press titles but does not distinguish between regional and national levels.

The Vltava Labe media publishing house, which publishes Denik.cz, has long played a dominant role in the regional press. The historical development, which included stages of centralization and acquisition of regional media as well as stages of development of regional editorial offices, is again the focus of Waschková Císařová's research.⁸

Regional TV

The need for a TV broadcasting license makes data on the number of regional TV stations more readily available than for the regional press. According to the 2021 annual report of the Radio and Television Broadcasting Council (RRTV), 31 regional/local television licenses were granted.⁹ Nevertheless, it cannot be said that the situation in the field of regional TV is clear and easy to describe. Broadcasting is poorly monitored; enforcement of rules does not work well. In 2020, Oživení analyzed the contracting of television programs purchased by the regions. Some regions, such as the Moravian-Silesian region, have contracts with up to 4 TV stations, while in some regions such broadcasting is not provided at all. We found several violations that are difficult for RRTV to enforce. See the example of Liberecká TV in the text below.

There is a complete lack of overview in the provision of city and municipal television. One example that demonstrates the difficulty of untangling relationships is the Municipal TV Příbor. On the city's official website, the TV is listed with a schedule of reports and a link to the Local TV Příbor website.¹⁰ ¹¹ The city has a contract¹² with Mgr. Irena Nedomová, who is also listed on the website as the only contact for the editorial office. On the television's website it can already be traced that it belongs to the Pohoda media group.¹³ According to data from the State Treasury, the recipient of money from the town of Příbor between 2018 and 2021 was the company Local TV Plus s.r.o. - part of the Pohoda media group. This is despite the fact that it is not listed as a supplier in the contract. Similarly, it is not

⁸ A brief description of developments up to 2012 in the conference paper *Man and Media* – http://www.clovekamedia.cz/konference/sborniky/cm_2012_podzim.pdf

⁹ <https://www.rrtv.cz/cz/files/zpravy/VZ2021.pdf>

¹⁰ <https://www.televize-pribor.cz/televize/>

¹¹ <https://www.pribor.eu/kontakty-a-media/mestska-televize/>

¹² <https://www.vhodne-uverejneni.cz/index.php?m=xenorders&h=order&a=detaildocumentsandimages&rwr=tvorba-programu-do-vysilani-local-tv-mestska-televize-pribor-2>

¹³ <https://www.pohodamedia.cz/>

easy to find out that the same company is behind the municipal television in Orlová – iTVO.¹⁴ The city's website lacks any information or contacts, nor are they listed on the TV's Youtube channel.¹⁵ The fact that the TV belongs to Local TV Plus s.r.o. can only be ascertained from the company's website, where it lists all its city TV stations.

Publisher networks, media groups

The media group A11, s.r.o., purchased a majority share in Regional TV CZ, s.r.o. in June 2022 from Valenta's group Our media, a.s. Our media is a media company linked by ownership to Senator and regional representative Ivo Valenta. The portfolio of A11, s.r.o. also includes free local press, for example, it publishes the monthly *Náš region* and monthly magazines for Prague's urban districts.

Regional TV ČR, which covers all regions, cooperates with other regional TV stations and can be said to represent regional television broadcasting in the Czech Republic. According to its website, Regional Television cooperates with more than 100 local, regional and internet TV stations and broadcasts nearly 11,000 reports from the Moravian, Czech and Silesian regions annually.¹⁶

The A11 media group publishes only its own titles, while other publishers mix both the publication of municipal newspapers and their own free titles in their portfolio. Among such companies is Český domov Mediahouse (formerly Strategic Consulting). The company publishes 48 titles. The Regional Publishing House operates in a similar way. It was founded from an advertising agency, the owner Jan Ondruš previously worked for Strategic Consulting.¹⁷ These media groups have completely resigned from the pursuit of professional journalism; the goal is to sell advertising.

My řešíme vaši propagaci, vy rozvíjejte váš byznys

- Na druhé straně je vždy profesionál**
Naši inzertní poradci jsou profíci. Ročně zpracují a administrují až 4 000 objednávek do 60 různých novin a časopisů. A to už je pořádná porce.
- Jste vždy v pohodě**
Trochu spolupráce od vás budeme potřebovat. Bez podkladů a pár základních informací to přece jen nejde. Ale zbytek práce už je na nás – zvolíme formu, graficky zpracujeme a navrhujeme vhodná média.
- Dárek za vyplnění formuláře**
Vkládáte do našich rukou propagaci vaší firmy. Je tedy fér, když vás hned na začátku odměníme. Ziskáváte 10 % slevu na první inzerát.

Mapping of disproportional relations in the area of citizens' knowledge

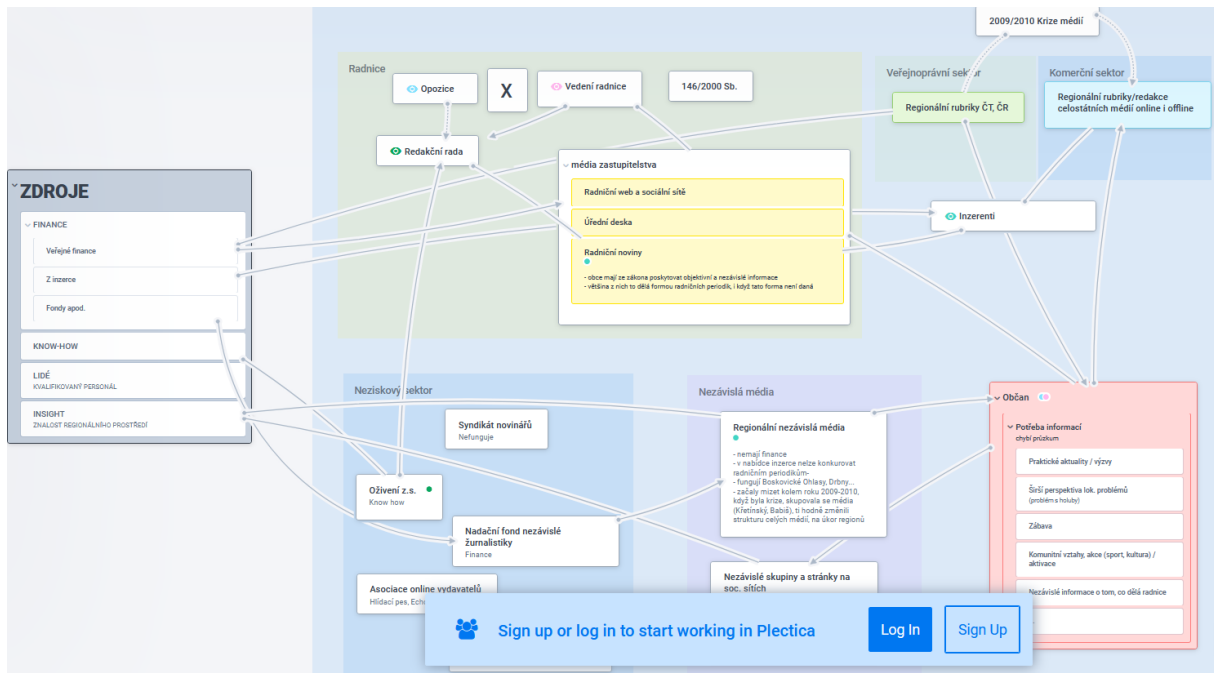
The following graphics shows mapping of disproportional relations in the area of citizens' knowledge pertaining to issues of regional character. The map is based on the 5R framework which looks at a systemic problem with the help of five dimensions – rules, roles, relationship, resources, and results. The center of the entire system is a citizen and his/her needs; the entire issue is looked at through this citizen's perspective.

¹⁴ <https://www.mesto-orlova.cz/cz/zpravodajstvi/itvo/>

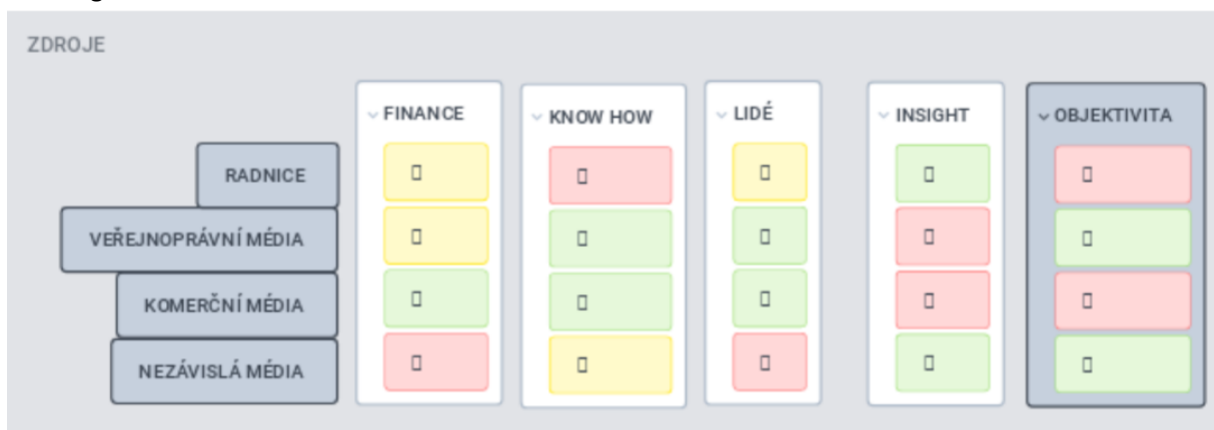
¹⁵ https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCPQDf3iyUiehrLLJMPS_CaQ

¹⁶ <https://www.regionálnitelevize.cz/o-nas>

¹⁷ <https://jirisochor.cz/2020/04/20/jan-ondrus-regionalni-vydavatelstvi/>



In addition to the actual municipal newspapers, other key actors are public and commercial media of a nationwide character and their regional editorial offices. This constitutes a problem, though. Namely since the media crisis, which started in the period 2009–2010 together with the arrival of smart technologies and changes of ownership relations in Czech media houses, commercial media have stopped to sufficiently cover regional topics and started to lack appropriate understanding of local specifics. An equally important role is also played by independent media, advertisers, and the non-profit sector. The above-mentioned actors can operate based on four pillars. A necessary source for their activities is financing. That can be obtained either from public budgets, or from advertisements or various funds. Furthermore, they need an insight into local issues and knowledge and reflection regarding the given local environment. Another important aspect is the know-how needed for quality journalistic work. The last pillar are human resources. Not only should there be a sufficient number of people, but they should also have an appropriate qualification and most importantly motivation to offer the citizens of a given region quality and objective information fulfilling valid standards.



The above-mentioned sources are distributed disproportionately between the actors despite the fact that each of them fulfills an indispensable role in this information ecosystem and needs support and conditions enabling quality operation. The worst conditions for its operation have local independent media, although they have the highest potential to fulfill citizens' need of objective and quality

information about events in their region. For this type of media, the current situation is basically liquidation. Moreover, a high threshold for the establishment of new independent media has been identified. This is made worse by the de facto non-existent tradition on which this type of media could build, including their democratic function in the Czech society. Another connected problem is the generally absent media literacy and raising of public awareness that should go hand in hand with it. The result is a vicious circle of insufficient know-how, funding, number of staff and of the actual reporters, and most importantly insufficient motivation to establish new media. Differing levels in the individual regions are not helping either.

The non-profit sector strives to contribute to remedying these imbalances of the system by supplementing necessary resources. Yet this sector itself is unorganized, fragmented and it also faces the issue of insufficient resources.

2. Financial resources of local and regional media

One of the main problems not only for local media in the Czech Republic is funding. It is difficult to grasp financial resources and economic relations in their entirety, so this chapter does not offer an exhaustive overview, but rather a few insights that have emerged from the data in the Treasury.

The analysis showed how TV stations strongly influence the regional media market. The following overview of funding shows that some regional TV stations receive sufficient funding, but the problem is the poor quality and unprofessionalism of their programs, especially if we focus on news and journalism.

Private publishers of municipal newspapers, such as Regional Publishing or Český domov Mediahouse (formerly Strategic Consulting), also draw large amounts of public money – both companies have concluded 101 contracts worth CZK 146 million and CZK 62 million respectively in the State Watchdog since 2016. Local advertising is another revenue stream, with both companies offering massive sales departments instead of quality journalists and editorial staff.

Television

Televisions with the highest participation in tenders 2018–2021:

televize	účasť v zakázkách	vyhrané zakázky	úspěšnost
POLAR televize Ostrava, s.r.o	28	23	82%
VČTV s.r.o.	11	8	73%
PRAHA TV s.r.o.	10	7	70%
TV MORAVA, s.r.o.	9	9	100%
ZAK TV s.r.o.	9	8	89%
JTV a.s.	7	6	86%

An example of the symbiotic relationship between the media and local governments is TV Morava, which has received more than CZK 19 million from public budgets over four years, almost exclusively from the Statutory City of Olomouc and the Olomouc Region, and has a 100% success rate in the tenders it has participated in.

The fact that there is no system of regulation of the relations between private media and public institutions is evidenced by the very diverse situation in the regions, as well as by the amounts paid by the regions to private television companies. The amounts are in the tens of millions of crowns. Of the total amount of 146 million paid by the regions over 4 years, 3 regions – Moravian-Silesian, Central Bohemian and Olomouc – spent 73% of this amount.

The funds shown in the tables below are the actual amounts paid as recorded in the Treasury. These are therefore not simply indicative contract amounts, but should nevertheless be taken as indicative.

In particular, there is a lack of more detailed data separating advertising purchases from the provision of news and other media formats.

kraj	celková částka	počet TV
Moravskoslezský kraj	57 067 704,55 Kč	4
Středočeský kraj	33 482 212,50 Kč	2
Olomoucký kraj	15 407 601,10 Kč	3
Jihočeský kraj	9 912 878,10 Kč	3
Zlínský kraj	9 619 328,00 Kč	3
Plzeňský kraj	8 536 096,58 Kč	2
Liberecký kraj	4 277 434,70 Kč	1
Královéhradecký kraj	4 238 222,00 Kč	1
Karlovarský kraj	2 209 460,00 Kč	1
Pardubický kraj	503 569,00 Kč	1
Ústecký kraj	375 100,00 Kč	1
Kraj Vysočina	48 000,00 Kč	1
Jihomoravský	- Kč	
celkem	145 677 606,53 Kč	

Most TV stations provide their services to multiple cities and counties at the same time.

Case of POLAR TV – Top ten public procurers between 2018–2021.

televize	POLAR televize Ostrava, s.r.o.
Město Bruntál	2 013 080,00 Kč
Město Frýdlant nad Ostravicí	2 013 440,00 Kč
Město Orlová	2 393 864,00 Kč
Město Studénka	2 807 200,00 Kč
Statutární město Opava	5 504 090,35 Kč
Město Nový Jičín	7 703 465,00 Kč
Statutární město Frýdek-Místek	9 673 296,60 Kč
Statutární město Havířov	10 255 996,30 Kč
Statutární město Karviná	10 876 690,00 Kč
Statutární město Ostrava	15 890 696,10 Kč
celkem	69 131 818,35 Kč

Print media

Example Haná press, s.r.o. – publisher of *Večerník* and the website *vecernikpv.cz*. It is run as an independent local media outlet. However, it is clear from Treasury data that one of the significant sources is public funds.

In the period 2018–2021, Haná press, s.r.o. received CZK 5,794,390.00 from ten municipal authorities and their contributory organizations. Most of the payments are in the tens of thousands and are mainly for the purchase of advertising space. However, two institutions have larger contracts with Haná Press.

The Statutory City of Prostějov paid a total of CZK 2,257,605.00 in the reporting period, of which more than CZK 880,000.00 in 2021. In the Register of Contracts one can find a contract for the publication of the Prostějov municipal journal in the years 2020–2022 for CZK 718,200, which was increased to CZK 1,045,750 by an amendment in 2022, and at the same time they are part of the municipality's advertising contracts, e.g. for the pre-election supplement of the printed evening newspaper *Život ve městě II*.

The example shows the symbiosis between newspapers and politicians in the locality. It is obvious that the basic principle of democratic control cannot function in such a relationship and the newspaper does not fulfil this function. It also blurs the distinction between information and advertising. The delivery of editorial newspapers works on the principle that the commissioning party supplies the background and materials for the content, the "newspaper" only processes them and sends them for checking before publication.

The financial connection of the media to public money, which is always decided by the respective political leadership, is one of the main reasons why poor quality and unprofessional reporting prevails in the regions. It is evident that the assumption that citizens will enforce quality media on their own does not work. This is where the state should better monitor the situation and also set rules.

3. Analysis of selected local government news channels

Local government news channels

As mentioned earlier in the text, the vacant space of independent media was mostly filled by media financed or directly published by local or regional governments. With the development of the Internet and the reduction of the technical costs of disseminating information, municipalities, cities and regions now offer – regional television broadcasts, printed municipal newspapers with free distribution to mailboxes¹⁸, mobile radio, additional news on their websites, and social networking sites are experiencing dramatic growth. **All formats have the same characteristics – the source and initiator are politicians or their press department, while those who produce the content often lack independence (they are directly subordinate to politicians) and/or professional standards.**

Press Act No. 46/2000 Coll., defines the periodical press of the local government. In the case of other media and social media communication, publishing is completely unregulated. Television news broadcasting is regulated by the Broadcasting Council, but its ability to regulate the regional television market is limited.

For newspapers, publication directly by local governments is predominant, which simplifies monitoring and supervision of compliance with the rules. Even here, however, there are dozens of cities that contract out some or all of the publishing. In contrast, for television broadcasting, they operate primarily privately. Contractual relations bring additional problems and are highly non-transparent. Very often, local governments arrange in their contracts for pre-broadcast supervision of reporting, presenting the contracts as securing advertising, but the resulting programs try to convince the viewer that it is a regular news program – by naming the programs, the style of the studio and the appearance of the presenter/moderator. In the case of printed newspapers, the contractual arrangements are even more varied.

Following an [analysis of regional news broadcasters](#) in 2020, Oživení sent four complaints about violations of the ban on election campaigning in the regional media and 9 complaints to the Broadcasting Council (RRTV) for failure to maintain objectivity and balance in news broadcasts purchased by the regions.

RRTV has carried out several investigations of its own based on our suggestions. A summary of all RRTV's actions is available in the 2021 Annual Report – <https://www.rtv.cz/cz/files/zpravy/VZ2021.pdf>.

Case study – Liberecká Televize – how does media supervision work in the Czech Republic?

We analyzed the contract between the Liberec Region and Liberecká TV s.r.o, a local news company. Under this contract, Liberecká TV supplied television news coverage of local events. The contract was fundamentally flawed because it allowed the contracting authority to review and approve the video spots (labelled as news) before they were broadcasted, thus allowing the political leadership of the

¹⁸ Not all municipalities offer free distribution directly to mailboxes; sometimes the newspapers are subject to a charge and can be bought by citizens at information centers, town halls, etc. For instance Vysoké Mýto, Polička, Litomyšl. However, the flat distribution model still prevails.

Liberec Region to censor what would be broadcasted. This is contrary to the provisions of the Broadcasting Act, which stipulates the obligation of the broadcaster to broadcast in its own name, on its own account and under its own responsibility and to be responsible for the content of the broadcast.

We contacted the Council for Radio and Television Broadcasting (hereinafter "the Council") and brought this misconduct to its attention in November 2020. In May 2021, the Council decided to notify Liberec Television to take corrective action. We later reviewed the new contract between the above entities and found that the substance of the problem described remained unchanged. We contacted the Council again in November 2021, this time with a suggestion of the possibility of a fine for the offence. However, the Council only submitted comments, which the contractor (Liberecká TV) was obliged to accept. Although there was a new contract between Liberecká TV and the Liberec Region, the story repeated itself again and in April 2022 we contacted the Council for the last time. The Council eventually decided to initiate an infringement procedure, which is currently underway.

Municipal newspapers

Municipal newspapers remain primarily a PR tool, even though it has been 10 years since the press law was amended. Oživení has been monitoring the newspapers since 2006 - although some of the monitored criteria are changing – for example, the proportion of abuses of municipal newspapers to unfairly denigrate political opponents has decreased – the primary form of reporting on events is a laudatory assessment of the achievements of the currently ruling representation.

A pre-election analysis of 50 municipal newspapers in the largest cities in 2022 shows that more than a third of them still lack any space for opposition. Most cities and municipalities set out in their own rules that they will provide objective and balanced information in their newspapers. But they cannot do that because they are dominantly controlled by the political leadership. A monitoring of pre-election issues of regional newspapers has brought similar results.¹⁹

[Pilot content analysis of municipal periodicals](#) was also carried out by PhDr. Jaromír Volek, Ph.D in cooperation with Focus. This analysis included a different sample and different methods but reached similar conclusions and recommendations.

Questionnaire survey among editors of municipal newspapers

We also addressed questions to all the editors of the analyzed municipal periodicals. 14 of them responded to the questions, two thirds of the respondents confirmed that the articles are subject to partial or full control of the municipal management.

Only 16% of editors have a journalism degree and 75% of them would appreciate professional training for journalists. Moreover, editorial work makes up on average half, sometimes even only 20%, of an editor's workload, so there is no room for better quality outputs. 63% of respondents would appreciate staff reinforcements in their work.

According to 9% of the editors, the content of the articles is fully controlled by the city management; 55% of the respondents answered that the articles are partially controlled. 18% would appreciate more independence of the editorial office from the city leadership. These conclusions correspond with the results of the content analysis of the newspapers on the high level of control of the content by the city leadership.

How municipal newspapers are contributing to the crisis in local journalism

The problem of objectivity and balance of the information presented is closely related to the fact that the editorial board of the newspaper is appointed by the city council in 85% of the 50 analyzed. In

¹⁹ https://www.oziveni.cz/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Infolist_kraje_2020.pdf

almost half of the municipalities analyzed, the opposition is not represented on the editorial board at all, in another third in such small numbers that they cannot have any real influence on the shape of the newspaper. The majority of the editorial staff consists of employees of the press department of local governments. The consequence is unambiguous – in most cases, there is a lack of professional knowledge of how to editorially process information in a way that meets the requirement of objectivity and independence.

All types of media that are published directly by local governments lack regulation for their funding. For municipal newspapers, this means that most supplement newspaper funding with advertising revenue. The latter is inherently focused on local/regional companies. For them, the newspaper offers a generous opportunity to advertise in a medium that is distributed free to all citizens in the municipality. This makes it difficult for independent local media, which cannot do without advertisers.

The voice of the readers, i.e. the citizens, has long been missing in the view of the situation of the municipal newspapers. Free distribution does not allow for readership feedback; it is not clear how citizens feel about the information they receive. However, we know from Oživení's consultancy work that all political problems are eventually reflected in the newspapers – either they start to function as a battleground for the leadership and the opposition, or censorship gradually worsens in order to maintain a positive image of the municipal leadership.

An example of considerable censorship is the newspaper of the city of Kladno and its inability to provide basic information about the dispute between the city and the Central Bohemian Region over payments for transport services.²⁰

There are also bizarre cases where politicians publish their own publications that are easily confused with the municipal newspaper. In the case of the last municipal elections, the Krásné Letňany group, headed by billionaire Pavel Sehnal, sent out a replica of *Letňany listy* to mailboxes, presenting its own program. News server novinky.cz reported on the entire case.²¹

Content analysis of municipal newspapers

Oživení regularly conducts a content analysis of municipal newspapers prior to communal elections. The aim is to evaluate – according to a unified methodology – the content of municipal newspapers, which are the local media of public service. Similarly as in the case of nationwide so-called public media, these newspapers are also published under a certain public authority, using public money and with the aim to inform citizens about activities of their local government.

The main indicator of our evaluation of the newspapers content is the BENEFIT index. Using several indicators, it measures the extent to which a given content is beneficial to citizens with respect to the possibility of free creation of opinions on situation in the local government and the possibility of citizens' involvement in a public debate and in solving of public issues.

Positive indicators	Negative indicators
Space referring about activities of politicians and the town hall, so-called political space (POP)	Anonymous political space with an unknown author (ANON)
Space with alternative opinions on the policy of the town leadership (ALT)	Political space with a harmful form, in which opponents with different opinions are usually being disparaged (ironizing, corrective commentaries, etc.) (POŠK)
Space with information on future decisions (BUD)	Excessive number of mentions about the town leadership in the text (mayor + members of the council)
Space with information on decisions taken by local government bodies (USN)	Excessive number of photos of politicians from the town leadership (mayor + members of the council)

²⁰ <https://hlasnatrouba.cz/samosprava/Kladno>

²¹ <https://www.novinky.cz/clanek/domaci-miliardar-sehnal-zkopiroval-radnicni-mesicnik-v-praze-letnanech-a-vydal-v-nem-svuj-program-40407365>

The main tool used in this study for measuring the level of objectivity and plurality of opinions in the content of periodicals is the index of varying opinions (IRON) which captures the share of space with alternative information (ALT) relative to the space dedicated in the given periodical to activities of local government bodies – i.e. to the so-called political space (POP).

The higher the value of the IRON index, the more varied opinions can be found in the given periodical, meaning that it contains also different opinions on local politics, which is beneficial to public debate and to free creation of opinions on local political leadership.

Analysis results – recommendations for local governments

Based on the analysis (which is attached to this document), we list factors that led to better results as regards benefit to the citizens and higher level of plurality of opinions.

- Editorial boards

A desirable functioning of an editorial board is influenced by its institutional embedment within the local government, that is by questions related to its formal establishment and status. In 86% of the studied sample, the editorial board was appointed by a municipal council or by a mayor. Both of these cases constitute a conflict of interests when the town hall leadership exercises direct influence over the newspapers content. **If the editorial board is established by the town leadership, the plurality of opinions in the newspapers is declining.**

The plurality of opinions expressed in the content is directly influenced by the number of representatives of the opposition in the editorial board. The presence of opposition in editorial boards leads to a higher pressure on the publishing of opposition's opinions. **The plurality of opinions significantly increases if opposition is represented in the editorial board.**

- Internal rules for publishing of periodicals

34% of the municipalities studied had no rules regarding the publishing of periodicals implemented. In such cases, the publishing is carried out rather informally, most likely without clear competences and responsibilities regarding the content creation. It can be assumed that in such environment, it is much easier to exercise an undesirable influence over the content in favor of the currently ruling political power. A data analysis has confirmed that **if written rules exist, the plurality of opinions is significantly higher** than in the case of publishers without such rules. The existence of rules – if they address at least basic parameters for ensuring objectivity and balance – univocally constitutes a starting prerequisite for higher objectivity and plurality of opinions in the content of periodicals referring about activities of local government bodies and offices. Thus, the main recommendation for towns and municipalities is to create internal rules for the publishing of their newspapers.

- Information on future decisions

The size of space dedicated in the newspapers to informing citizens about future decisions over which they will have no direct influence reflects the tendency of the town hall to involve their citizens in the process of public decision making. In order for the citizens to be involved, to express their preferences in a public debate and to influence their representatives, they have to be informed about these possibilities. In the case of newspapers containing at least some information on future decisions, both the IRON and BENEFIT indexes showed higher values than in the case of newspapers containing no mention of future decisions. Therefore, it follows from our analysis that **those editorial offices that try to inform about future decisions of their local government in their newspapers at the same time allow for greater plurality of opinions in their content.**

- Anonymous political space

By anonymous space we understand the space of text without its author being mentioned (not even under an editorial abbreviation clearly identifying a specific author). It can be said that anonymously published texts generally create easier conditions for censorship and denigration of opponents. In the case of municipal newspapers, anonymous texts make it easier to bring calculated and non-critical

presentation of the political leadership. It follows from our analysis that **newspapers with a small anonymous space allow for higher plurality of opinions in their content.**

- Propagation of the municipal political leadership

Representatives of the local municipality are regularly being mentioned and depicted in the content of local newspapers, which holds true especially for the representatives of local executive who exercise a dominant influence over the local politics (for instance mayor, councilors). It is, therefore, a completely common and natural part of local news. Yet at the same time, it can be also used as a tool for disproportionate political agitation of these representatives to the detriment of providing objective and balanced information on local politics. The basic criterion for the evaluation of the level of political propagation in periodicals used in our analysis is the number of mentions and photos of a mayor (regional council president, burgomaster) and councilors (deputy mayor, deputies) which is expressed by the number of mentions and photos on one standardized A4 page of the political space. This enables us to exactly compare concentrations of mentions and photos in periodicals of various formats. **It follows from the analysis that those newspapers with fewer mentions about the town leadership reach better results in the overall evaluation.**

- Harmful form of political space

The presence of a harmful form significantly damages the level of public debate within a periodical and lowers the chances of a balanced exchange of opinions. It is usually manifested through targeted disparaging of opponents with different opinions (be it individuals or groups), ironizing, distorting their statements or actions and through publishing of corrective commentaries without a possibility of adequate defense.

Comparison of the analysis results with previous years

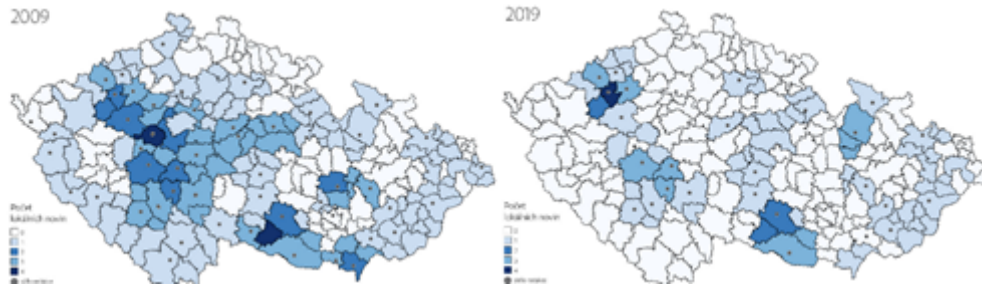
The pleasing news is that a number of the evaluated areas showed slight improvement compared to the analyses from 2018, 2014 and 2006. 15% more local governments have established their internal rules for publishing of periodicals compared to 2018. The percentage of information for citizens on future decisions of their local governments has also risen very slightly (by 0.35%); the extent of the anonymous space remains de facto unchanged, but there has been an improvement as to the size of the space with harmful content by 0.11%. The space for political propagation has also slightly diminished, namely by 0.19 mentions on one A4 page of POP.

4. Conclusions from the roundtable – definition of the biggest problems of local journalism and proposed remedies

The project brought together journalists, editors, publishers and researchers in a roundtable to define the basic problems of local journalism and at the same time find consensus on appropriate measures to remedy the crisis situation. Consensus was not easily found and the following list of points was agreed by those present. Prior to the roundtable, everyone filled out a questionnaire, and we report the percentage agreement from the responses.

The “information deserts” procedure

As evidenced by the [research](#) of Lenka Waschková Čísařová from 2019, which she presented at the roundtable, the number of independent local media outlets has declined from 60 to 29 titles over the course of a decade. In addition, the place of traditional local media is taken by chains (Nationwide regional daily prints), which replace local information with regional or national news.



Thus, in many areas we do not find independent (i.e. not controlled by the local government) and local media (containing truly local information). The emergence of information deserts – places not covered by independent media – has resulted in lower voter turnout, more expensive public procurement and a lack of oversight of local politicians. The empty media space is then filled by media dependent on local government, which are often abused to promote the city's leadership and sometimes prevent pluralism of opinion.

Economic model, system of financial support for media

Publishing local media is not economically sustainable at present.

All participants in the roundtable believe that public funding for the media should be introduced. There is no clear consensus on the form of financial support. Over 60% think that state institutions should provide support to the media, while others would opt for private funds (such as the existing [Foundation for Independent Journalism](#)), or professional organizations.

Regarding the form of subsidy, 90% were in favor of a direct operating subsidy (as is the case in Canada, France, Russia and Austria, for example). From the indirect subsidy point of view, the optimal option seems to be a reduction in VAT on printing or a reduction in postal rates for periodicals. Alternatively, a combination of both types of support.

When introducing financial support to the media, the risk of purpose-built media must be guarded against.

Most of the experts present were in favor of linking financial support to criteria for quality journalism.

Low level of professionalization, setting criteria for quality journalism and media self-regulation

The experts present agreed that the regions are overwhelmed by formats that fall short of the quality of news media and are burdened by interest pressures, ties and an opaque ownership structure. They also identified the low level of professionalism of journalists and the lack of uniform journalistic standards as problematic.

Most of the experts present considered it desirable for private local media to set up their own regulatory mechanisms. There is no coherence between the sub-existing self-regulatory mechanisms, with journalists setting their own and publishers setting different ones.

Related to this is the requirement for common codes of ethics that would apply to all media platforms and contribute to overall transparency.

Over 65% of those present considered the low level of professionalization of journalists to be a problem. This problem is linked to low staff capacity, lack of resources, and the low social prestige of the position of a regional journalist.

Conflicting interests of private media owners, opaque ownership and ties, interest pressures

Under the Conflict of Interest Act, politicians are prohibited from publishing periodicals or broadcasting. However, the law does not cover cases in which a politician is not the formal operator of a media outlet, but exercises influence over it, for example through a trust fund. The management of online media is not considered a conflict of interest at all.

A common demand of the roundtable participants is to adjust the current state of affairs and to strengthen overall supervision of compliance with the Conflict of Interest Act.

Promoting cooperation between actors – creation of a platform for sharing

The participants of the roundtable unanimously stated that they lacked virtually any coordinated cooperation of professionals in the field of local journalism. Experts duplicate each other's research, do not share their conclusions and lack sufficient space to discuss the current situation.

Therefore, as a first step, we have created a common group to share outputs and inform each other.

Another common issue identified by participants was the lack of capacity for administrative activities and they unanimously supported the request for a joint European grant.